

Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration

Response from St John's Innovation Centre Ltd., Cambridge

The comments made below relate only to the experience of St John's Innovation Centre Ltd (SJIC) and its 50+ tenant companies in working with the University of Cambridge and the Anglia Polytechnic University (APU) in Cambridge. Our comments are given in no particular order, and are structured around our experience of (a) examples of good practice, (b) what we feel to be the main barriers to improved collaboration, and (c) ways in which we feel more effective collaborations could be developed.

Best practice and examples of excellence

1. Student internships: "Experience Entrepreneurship" and "STEP".

SJIC has been actively involved with placing university students in local companies for nine years. Three schemes that have been particularly effective are "STEP UK" and its spin-off programme focused on new technology ventures in Cambridge, "Experience Entrepreneurship". The third is "STEP International", first piloted in Cambridge in 1999, which places students in mainland European locations for six weeks to seek out technology transfer opportunities for companies in the East of England, as well as those in their respective locations.

Despite being under-resourced, our experience has been that these programmes provide an excellent mechanism for transferring knowledge from the universities to companies and other organisations, in the form of bright, enthusiastic students focused on addressing key business and technical problems. **Jointly these programmes have placed 200 students in local companies over the past 9 years and 36 in mainland Europe.**

The management of these programmes has proved to be extremely resource intensive, but the outcomes for the companies and for the participating students have been highly positive. It should be noted that the Experience Entrepreneurship programme is open to First to Final year undergraduates as well as Ph.D candidates, whereas STEP programmes are open to any second or penultimate student studying at any university in the UK.

www.cec.cam.ac.uk/teaching/experience.html

www.step.org.uk

2. University of Cambridge Entrepreneurship Centre (CEC)

St John's Innovation Centre has been involved since 1998 with the planning, fund raising and management support for the University of Cambridge Entrepreneurship Centre (known as "CEC") - one of the Office of Science and Technology funded Science Enterprise Centres. Our view is that CEC is helping to make a significant impact on the development of an 'enterprise culture' within the University by actively engaging the local business community. This engagement takes place through various educational and business support mechanisms. On the educational side, CEC has applied the knowledge of over 100 local business people as lecturers on programmes such as the "Entrepreneurship Summer School", and "Basics of Building a Business" programmes.

On the business creation side, successful activities include the business mentoring programme, business plan competitions, sponsorship and membership schemes, networking events, service provider surgeries and entrepreneurs in residence. CEC seems to be successfully blurring the boundaries between both the academic and business worlds, and between educational and business creation activities.

www.cec.cam.ac.uk

3. Institute for Manufacturing Industry Links Unit

The Institute for Manufacturing (part of Cambridge University Engineering Department) through its Industry Links Unit “delivers knowledge in accessible, useable formats so that partner companies can gain practical benefits.” Our experience is that the integration of the Industry Links Unit activities (e.g., events, publications, problem-solving service, membership scheme and special interest groups) coupled with the Institute’s practically focused educational and research activities seems to provide a great interface between the academic and business communities in matters relating to manufacturing and management.

www.ifm.eng.cam.ac.uk

4. Anglia Polytechnic University (APU) ‘enterprise@APU’ website.

This simple yet effective website provides a clear route to accessing specific IT related resources of APU. Use of this site and follow-up contacts have shown that APU provides a quick and direct way to access support and, of equal importance, clearly communicates what is not available! Rather than trying to be all things to all people, this shows an example of good practice in focused university-business interaction.

www.enterprise.anglia.ac.uk

5. Enterprise Link

Enterprise Link is a collaboration between the University of Cambridge and local business support community focused on networking and support organisation for early stage technology ventures. It is managed by a partnerships of St John’s Innovation Centre, University of Cambridge Entrepreneurship Centre, Institute for Manufacturing and Cambridgeshire Business Services. This organisation provides a vehicle for helping to target the resources of the University and business community partners specially onto a clearly defined group with the business community. Through its seminars, networking events, publications and support services it has managed to build an active community of over 200 early stage technology entrepreneurs. This initiative was ‘pump primed’ with funding from the local Business Link and support from a charitable organisation.

www.enterprise-link.co.uk

6. Cambridge Technopole Group

With the plethora of new funding streams available for universities to engage in ‘third stream’ activities, coupled with the emerging role of the regional development agencies and local partnerships, a major concern for St John’s Innovation Centre had been how to

avoid duplication of effort and confusion of purpose in Cambridge. To help avoid this a group has been formed that brings together key representatives of the Cambridge business support providers and those organisations of the University of Cambridge engaged specifically in ‘third stream’ activities. Group members include:

Cambridge Network	University of Cambridge Institute for Manufacturing	University of Cambridge Corporate Liaison Office
Business Link for Cambridgeshire	Cambridgeshire Chamber of Commerce	Cambridgeshire Enterprise Services
Eastern Region Biotechnology Initiative	Greater Cambridge Partnership	University of Cambridge Entrepreneurship Centre
St John’s Innovation Centre Ltd	Regional Infrastructure for Innovation Project	Cambridge Science Park

The group meets several times each year and has the remit to (1) encourage the flow of information on new projects and initiatives between the members of the Group and to work together for the benefit of business customers (2) identify the key organisations involved in business support in the Greater Cambridge sub-region for the purposes of accurately signposting business customers; (3) publicise and explain the origins and growth of the ‘Cambridge Phenomenon’ in order to attract and retain appropriate new businesses to the sub-region and; (4) identify gaps in the provision of support for businesses, and to lobby for resources to fill.

The Group’s regular meetings have proved to be particularly effective at identifying gaps in provision, opportunities for collaboration, and new local, regional and national initiatives. The report produced by the Group – the “Cambridge Technopole Report” – has been widely acknowledged as a very useful resource for helping to map out the ways in which the local universities and the business community are working together. This initiative is part funded by sponsorship and direct support from a charity.

www.cec.cam.ac.uk/research/cambridgetechnopole.html

7. CamConnect – Recruitment for start-ups

One of the positive issues to raise in relation to recruitment has been the development in Cambridge of activities to encourage small and early stage ventures to recruit from the University of Cambridge. Traditionally, Cambridge students have been targeted by the big, multinational companies and smaller, local companies finding it harder to gain access. To counter this, groups within the university (Careers Service and Cambridge Entrepreneurship Centre) have delivered a successful programme for a number of years under the banner of “CamConnect”. This provides an opportunity for regional technology-based and services companies to meet and recruit Cambridge University students from all departments (including undergraduates, postgraduates and MBAs). This scheme has been particularly welcomed by early stage technology ventures in the Cambridge area.

www.careers.cam.ac.uk/sectors/camconnect/camconnecthome.asp

Main barriers to improving collaborative activities

1. Universities' lack of strategy and/or clear communication for 'third stream' activities

Our experience to date has shown that many companies - especially early stage and small ventures - are simply unaware either (a) that universities are willing to work with them and (b) what the universities could do for them.

Our impression is that this is partly a result of universities themselves not having a clear view of what their strategy for 'third stream' activities should be and how local business collaboration fit within this. If there is no coherent strategy in this area, no clear message can be transmitted to the local business community. The result of this is that individual departments and academics build up very fruitful relationships with certain local organisations, but these remain largely uncoordinated pockets of excellence in university-business collaboration rather than integrated programme of activities linked back to the other main activities of the university – research and teaching, and there is a lack of support funding to encourage SMEs to collaborate with CU departments.

2. Lack of joined-up thinking between regional development agency, Small Business Service and universities

The Cambridge Technopole Group discussed earlier goes some way to bringing together the regional development agency, business support providers and the University of Cambridge. This is a great example of a group that does good simply by bringing together some of the 'right' people. However it is hindered by the fact that although it may have influence, it has no power or resources to get these organisations to integrate their activities more effectively. Each organisation will focus, naturally, on the needs of its own of stakeholders and delivery to its particular performance measures.

There is also a perception of too much reliance is placed by national & local government on the goodwill of "local catalysts" to create more effective collaborations between academia & industry whether large or small companies. This may lead to resentment as these often altruistic local players begin to resent the opportunity cost of doing what they believe the local public support agencies are paid to do.

Suggestions for new / improvements to existing collaborative activities

1. University strategy and communications

This is a simple idea but clearly one that is very hard to implement. If universities were required to state explicitly what their strategy is for 'third stream' activities (even if it is to state that "we don't do this"!) then the opportunity for developing appropriate channels of communication and interaction can be developed. The various Government schemes to support 'third stream' activities (e.g., through HEIF) would seem to only have a chance of making a sustained impact on business-university collaboration if this issue of clarifying and communicating strategy can be addressed. Without this, the view from the

business community that this is just academics “playing at business” to get more funding may become more widespread.

2. Integration of SBS, RDA and university activities

As stated earlier, a forum such as the Cambridge Technopole Group can help various business support organisations collaborate, but this is very much at the operational rather than strategic level. If the local SBS, RDA and universities could take some steps towards clarifying what they each see as their role in the support of business activities and identifying clear areas of integration, this would seem to be a real step in the right direction.

3. Regional innovation facilitation service

One operational-level initiative that could go some way to overcoming some of the barriers to improving collaboration is that of a regional innovation facilitation service. The core of this would be a neutral organisation for signposting and loosely facilitation the delivery of available resource – but which would have no link to actual service provision. This has many benefits including (a) it forces service providers to clarify their offering and differentiate it to the end-purchaser, and (b) it removes bias by de-coupling information about services from the delivery of services. This could also provide an interesting way to integrate technology transfer support provision, for example linking the European Innovation Relay Centres with University technology transfer offices and research institutes.